

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

Tuesday, May 10, 2022

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

The Honorable Kiran Ahuja
Director
Office of Personnel Management
1900 E Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20415

Dear Secretary Vilsack, Secretary Haaland, and Director Ahuja:

As the 2022 fire season begins, we urge you to take necessary steps to avert critical staffing shortages in the wildland firefighting workforce. By using existing authority to establish a special pay rate for federal wildland firefighters, we can directly address the recruitment and retention crisis, and ensure that the pending “wildland firefighter” occupational series reflects the professional capabilities of our wildland firefighters.

Years of low pay and other issues have hollowed out the federal wildland firefighting workforce. Last year, fire officials were unable to fill an unprecedented 1,800 interagency requests for wildland firefighting crews, and more than 1,900 requests for fire engines.¹ In one state, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) had 60 engines idle because of low staffing in the midst of the largest fire in state history. Such shortages exist throughout the West heading into the 2022 fire season, with officials estimating staffing will be below 75% in some regions. This is an urgent threat to natural resources, public safety, and taxpayer dollars, as the Federal Government pays a premium to contract and borrow firefighting resources from state and local authorities when federal resources are unavailable.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) must use its authority to stop further attrition in the wildland firefighting workforce. OPM has the authority for special pay rates to address staffing problems caused by significantly higher non-Federal pay rates, the remoteness of the area or location involved, the undesirability of the working conditions or nature of the work involved, and any other circumstances OPM considers appropriate. All these criteria appear applicable in this case.

¹ https://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/intelligence/2021_statsumm/resource_charts_tables21.pdf

We recognize that OPM, in collaboration with USFS and the Department of Interior (DOI), is in the process of establishing a new “wildland firefighter” occupational series as required under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. This job series is an important step towards a sustainable livelihood and career path for federal wildland firefighters, with other steps to include housing support, modified scheduling, and leave policies that reflect the unique nature of wildland firefighting. A new job series that maintains the status quo could lead to a surge in resignations just as fire season begins, and OPM must be clear about how it will use special authorities in the near term to address any shortcoming in the new wildland firefighter occupational series.

Given OPM’s function as “the chief human resources agency and personnel policy manager for the Federal Government,” we wish to underscore some of the factors driving attrition in the wildland firefighting workforce, and their long-term implications. Pay is the most important issue, as it is in many professions and sectors of the economy. However, OPM policies and the challenges of being a wildland firefighter compound financial stress in unique and damaging ways. For example, federal wildland firefighters are paid by the hour, even when they are at an incident and miles from the nearest population center and effectively working. Many state and local firefighters are paid on a “portal-to-portal” basis, meaning 24 hours a day, from the time they are assigned to a wildland fire until the time they return, and are reimbursed on that basis by the federal government. Insisting on scheduling and paying federal wildland firefighters in the same manner as other federal employees, rather than other wildland firefighters, is one way in which arbitrary policies are driving recruitment and retention problems.

As President Biden said last year, “the only thing that really matters is if there’s enough firefighters.” The land management agencies have lost thousands of wildland firefighters in just the last few years. The federal wildland firefighting workforce is entering a pivotal stretch with the end of OPM’s classification review process and the beginning of fire season. The Administration must stop attrition and commit to rebuilding the ranks of our firefighting service. This starts with increases in pay and benefits. The situation is urgent, and we stand ready to work with you to ensure our federal wildland firefighters are fully supported and compensated.

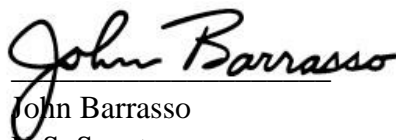
Sincerely,



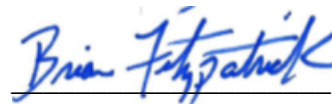
Kyrsten Sinema
U.S. Senator



Katie Porter
Member of Congress




John Barrasso
U.S. Senator



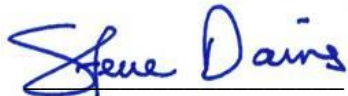
Brian Fitzpatrick
Member of Congress



Jon Tester
U.S. Senator



Tom O'Halleran
Member of Congress




Steve Daines
U.S. Senator



Young Kim
Member of Congress



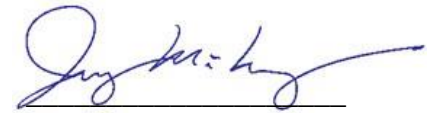
Mark Kelly
U.S. Senator




Joe Neguse
Member of Congress




Mike Crapo
U.S. Senator



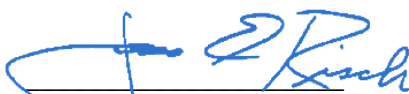
Jerry McNerney
Member of Congress



Alex Padilla
U.S. Senator



Zoe Lofgren
Member of Congress




James E. Risch
U.S. Senator



Jason Crow
Member of Congress

/s/ Martin Heinrich

Martin Heinrich
U.S. Senator



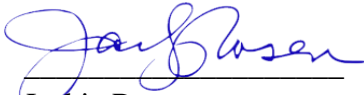
Tony Cardenas
Member of Congress



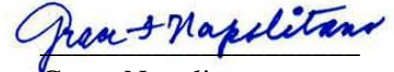
Cynthia Lummis
U.S. Senator



Teresa Leger Fernandez
Member of Congress



Jackie Rosen
U.S. Senator



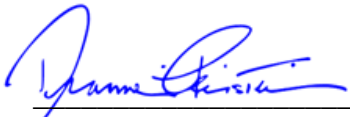
Grace Napolitano
Member of Congress



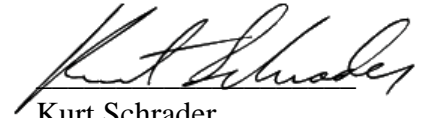
Lisa Murkowski
U.S. Senator



Mark Takano
Member of Congress



Dianne Feinstein
U.S. Senator



Kurt Schrader
Member of Congress



Mitt Romney
U.S. Senator



Ron Wyden
U.S. Senator